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Panels pursue tantalizing reports that drugs moved on contra supply routes

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WASHINGTON — The congressional investigator, recently returned from a trip to Miami to question convicted drug smugglers on their allegations that Nicaraguan rebels were involved in smuggling cocaine, heaved a sigh of frustration.

"Let me tell you a story," he said. "I'm down there in Miami talking to one of the guys saying this stuff. He's telling me a great story. It's all about drugs and contras and guns and smuggling. It's beautiful. I'd love to believe it. One little problem, though. He also tells me he's a fruitarian and he takes cocaine enemas. I think: I got a little credibility problem here."

After several months of probing, investigators from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and House subcommittee on crime are still trying to figure just what is true and what is not when it comes to one of the most explosive areas of the Iran-contra affair: the numerous allegations that the contras, aided or willfully ignored by U.S. government officials, have smuggled cocaine and marijuana into the United States.

The committee staffs hope to schedule public hearings into the matter within a month or so, but are

not much closer to the truth than they were when they began their investigation last fall.

"It is very difficult," said the investigator. "We are dealing with people whose every word has to be checked and cross-checked. We are in a situation where everyone you talk to has a motive for telling you anything they think you might want to hear."

The investigator, who has interviewed more than a dozen sources so far, compared the drug world of Miami to Casablanca in the early days of World War II. "It's all plots and counterplots," he said. "You sit in a saloon down there and you will hear that anyone you can think of is smuggling coke. You sit there long enough and sooner or later someone will tell you Pope John Paul brought in a couple of keys [kilograms of cocaine] last time he came here."

The difficulty has been compounded, sources said, because the Justice Department has so far not responded to repeated requests by the committees for any information on allegations regarding specific contra figures and drug smuggling. One Senate source said Assistant U.S. Attorney Leon Kellner, who has jurisdiction over Miami, told investigators in November that he could provide no information because the material requested involved current investigations.

Despite the confusion and lack of reliable information, congressional investigators are sure that at least some people in the contra movement were engaged in cocaine and marijuana smuggling from Central America to the United States in the last several years. They base their beliefs on the number and similarity of allegations they have received, they said.

The most recent, unconfirmed, allegation they have received holds that contra official Mario Calero was investigated last year by the Drug Enforcement Administration for possible involvement in a cocaine smuggling operation between New Orleans and San Francisco.

DEA spokesman Bill Deac, in Washington, said he did not know whether such an investigation had been conducted. The DEA agent who reportedly conducted the investigation declined to comment but implied that such an investigation had existed or still existed, saying that it would be against the law for him to discuss any past or continuing DEA probe.

Mr. Calero, the chief procurement officer for the contras' largest army, said he knew of no such investigation. Interviewed yesterday by tele-

phone from his home in Kenner, La., Mr. Calero angrily denounced as "ridiculous and false" any allegation that he had ever been involved in any drug smuggling. "Anyone who says that can go straight to hell," Mr. Calero said.

Federal officials continue to maintain that there is no evidence of systematic drug smuggling by contras, though the State Department acknowledged last year that in the past some elements in the contra camp had been involved in drug trafficking. DEA spokesmen in Wash-

ington and Miami said they had no evidence to support current allegations of contra drug smuggling. Contra officials have repeatedly denied any involvement in drug running.

The central allegations the congressional committees are probing are:

□ That members of the secret contra air-support network that supplied the rebels with weapons during a 1984-1986 congressional ban on U.S. military aid ferried cocaine and marijuana to the United States from Central America while returning from weapons shipment flights.

□ That contra leaders and officials of the CIA and the DEA knew of drug smuggling by contra supply crews and either turned a blind eye or actually encouraged the activity.

Both the CIA and the DEA have repeatedly denied any complicity in contra drug trafficking.

The allegations of contra drug smuggling have been for years a conversation topic in the conspiracy-charged air of Miami, but have taken on new significance with the recent public airing of such charges.

Most recently, Michael Toliver, a convicted drug smuggler serving time in a Florida prison, has claimed that he flew weapons to Central America for the contras in 1986 and flew drugs back.

In interviews with reporters and a congressional investigator, Toliver reportedly has said he landed a DC-6 cargo plane carrying 25,000 pounds of marijuana at Homestead Air Force Base near Miami on March 6, 1986. Homestead spokesman Lt. Tom Barth said an internal investigation "found no trace of that flight."

In a deposition to Daniel Sheehan, a lawyer who has filed a civil racketeering suit in Miami against 29 people he claims were involved in smuggling arms for the contras, Toliver claimed that he was recruited in the summer of 1985 by reported ex-CIA agents Felix Rodriguez and Rafael Quintero to fly arms to contra camps in Honduras.

Toliver, 40, said he made two flights for the contras between Au-

gust 1985 and July 1986, for which he was paid about \$125,000. He said he was told there would be a "bonus" in the operation in that he could "be sort of an entrepreneur" on the flight back. He said other pilots told him they routinely flew weapons to the contras from the United States and returned with cocaine.

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Toliver's story jibes in its essence with those told by George Morales, 37, and Gary W. Betzner, 45. Morales, a former three-time champion speedboat racer, is serving a sentence in Florida after pleading guilty to drug-smuggling and tax-evasion charges. Betzner is awaiting trial in a drug case and is in prison.

Both men have told congressional investigators and reporters they were recruited to fly weapons to Central America by men who they thought were federal agents. Betzner has said there was a government-sponsored "guns-for-drugs" program that worked basically along the lines of "guns down, drugs back."

In all three cases, said Miami DEA spokesman Jack Hook, the allegations have been investigated and found to be "totally false, totally ludicrous." Mr. Hook said, "These are convicted drug smugglers [Betzner and Toliver have previous convictions] who are taking advantage of the political climate of the time."